



**MEDAL OF HONOR**

# **BRIEF HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS**

## **CIVIL WAR**

*Of the 1,523 Medals of Honor awarded, 23 were awarded to Black soldiers and sailors. The first Black to be awarded the Medal of Honor was Robert Blake, a mess steward aboard the gunboat USS Marblehead. In an attack on Confederate forces on John's Island, South Carolina, Blake took over the dangerous duties of the powder boy, carrying powder from the ship's magazines to the gun deck, after an exploding shell killed one of the ship's powder boys. His efforts were so fearless and efficient that his commanding officer credited him with the ship's victory in destroying Confederate forces ashore.*

## **INDIAN CAMPAIGNS**

*Of the 17 Medals of Honor won by black soldiers during the Indian Wars, 11 were won by the Buffalo Soldiers.*

## **WORLD WAR I**

*Of the 127 Medals of Honor awarded during World War I, none were awarded to Blacks, until 1991 when President Bush posthumously awarded the 128th Medal of Honor to Corporal Freddie Stowers, a Black soldier killed while leading his company in an assault against a German-held hill in France on September 28, 1918.*

## **WORLD WAR II**

*At the end of the war, no black soldier or sailor had been awarded the Medal of Honor. In a ceremony on January 13, 1997, President Clinton presented the Medal of Honor to 1LT Vernon J. Baker, the only surviving member of the seven-man group. The President also presented posthumous Medal of Honor to the families of the remaining six recipients: MAJ Charles L. Thomas, 1LT John R. Fox, Ssg Ruben Rivers, Ssg Edward A. Carter, Jr., PFC Willy F. James, Jr., and PVT George Watson.*

## **KOREAN WAR**

*Two Black Army sergeants, Cornelius H. Charlton and William Thompson, were among the 131 Medal of Honor recipients.*

## **VIETNAM WAR**

*There were 20 Blacks among the 237 Medal of Honor recipients in the Vietnam era: 15 soldiers and 5 Marines.*

## **SEVEN WORLD WAR II VETERANS TO RECEIVE MEDALS OF HONOR**

**Induction to Pentagon's Hall of  
By**

**Heroes  
S.H. Kelly**

**MDW News Service**

**WASHINGTON, DC (Army News Service, Jan. 13, 1997) -- Former 1st Lt. Vernon J. Baker, of St. Maries, Idaho, is one of seven black World War II veterans scheduled to be presented Medals of Honor Jan. 13 by President William Clinton, making them the only black recipients of the medal for World War II.**

**Receiving the medals posthumously:**

**Maj. Charles L. Thomas, of Detroit**

**First Lt. John R. Fox, of Cincinnati, Ohio**

**Staff Sgt. Ruben Rivers, of Oklahoma City, Okla.**

**Staff Sgt. Edward A. Carter Jr., of Los Angeles**

**Pfc. Willy F. James Jr., of Kansas City, Mo.**

**Pvt. George Watson, of Birmingham, Ala.**

**Where possible, family members accepted the honors for the deceased soldiers.**

**With the exception of Rivers, who was previously awarded the Silver Star, they were all recipients of Distinguished Service Crosses, the nation's second-highest award for valor in combat. The Silver Star is the third-highest.**

**The presentations, according to Clinton, are taking place because due recognition was not accorded these soldiers earlier. To recognize them now, Congress authorized a statute of limitations waiver that for them had expired in 1952. The seven veterans were also scheduled to be inducted to the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes in a Monday afternoon ceremony hosted by Army Chief of Staff General Dennis J. Reimer.**

**In 1943, because Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower felt that not enough Medals of Honor were being awarded, he upgraded a number of Distinguished Service Award recommendations to Medal of Honor recommendations.**

**There is also precedent for waiving the statute of limitation. In 1991, black World War I veteran Cpl. Freddie Stowers, who served with the 93rd Infantry Division, got the Medal of Honor by virtue of a waiver 73 years after his death. Stowers had been cited posthumously for leading his squad in an attack against entrenched mortar and machine-gun positions in France that had caused more than 50 percent casualties in his company. He was killed in the assault. His is the only Medal of Honor presented to a black service member for World War I.**

**The presentations are the result of a study by Shaw University, in Raleigh, N.C., which was contracted by the Army in 1993 to determine if there was a racial disparity in the way Medal of Honor recipients were selected. Out of 432 presented for World War II, none went to any of more than a million blacks who served.**

**Shaw found that there was disparity, and said the political climate and Army practices during the war guaranteed that no black soldier would receive the military's top award. The seven were among those members of the study**

**call of duty" standard. (SOURCE: [www.dtic.mil/armylink/news](http://www.dtic.mil/armylink/news))**

**While no documentary evidence could be found among military records of any**



## **FIRST LIEUTENANT VERNON J. BAKER**

### **UNITED STATES ARMY**

### **MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

For extraordinary heroism in action on 5 and 6 April 1945, near Viareggio, Italy. Then Second Lieutenant Baker demonstrated outstanding courage and leadership in destroying enemy installations, personnel and equipment during his company's attack against a strongly entrenched enemy in mountainous terrain. When his company was stopped by the concentration of fire from several machine gun emplacements, he crawled to one position and destroyed it, killing three Germans. Continuing forward, he attacked and enemy observation post and killed two occupants. With the aid of one of his men, Lieutenant Baker attacked two more machine gun nests, killing or wounding the four enemy soldiers occupying these positions. He then covered the evacuation of the wounded personnel of his company by occupying an exposed position and drawing the enemy's fire. On the following night Lieutenant Baker voluntarily led a battalion advance through enemy mine fields and heavy fire toward the division objective. Second Lieutenant Baker's fighting spirit and daring leadership were an inspiration to his men and exemplify the highest traditions of the Armed Forces.



**STAFF SERGEANT EDWARD A. CARTER,**  
**JR. UNITED STATES ARMY**  
**MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

For extraordinary heroism in action on 23 March 1945, near Speyer, Germany. When the tank on which he was riding received heavy bazooka and small arms fire, Sergeant Carter voluntarily attempted to lead a three-man group across an open field. Within a short time, two of his men were killed and the third seriously wounded. Continuing on alone, he was wounded five times and finally forced to take cover. As eight enemy riflemen attempted to capture him, Sergeant Carter killed six of them and captured the remaining two. He then crossed the field using as a shield his two prisoners from which he obtained valuable information concerning the disposition of enemy troops. Staff Sergeant Carter's extraordinary heroism was an inspiration to the officers and men of the Seventh Army Infantry Company Number 1 (Provisional) and exemplify the highest traditions of the Armed Forces.



## **FIRST LIEUTENANT JOHN R. FOX** **UNITED STATES ARMY**

### **MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

For extraordinary heroism against an armed enemy in the vicinity of Sommocolonia, Italy on 26 December 1944, while serving as a member of Cannon Company, 366th Infantry Regiment, 92d Infantry Division. During the preceding few weeks, Lieutenant Fox served with the 598th Field Artillery Battalion as a forward observer. On Christmas night, enemy soldiers gradually infiltrated the town of Sommocolonia in civilian clothes, and by early morning the town was largely in hostile hands. Commencing with a heavy barrage of enemy artillery at 0400 hours on 26 December 1944, an organized attack by uniformed German units began. Being greatly outnumbered, most of the United States Infantry forces were forced to withdraw from the town, but Lieutenant Fox and some other members of his observer party voluntarily remained on the second floor of a house to direct defensive artillery fire. At 0800 hours, Lieutenant Fox reported that the Germans were in the streets and attacking in strength. He then called for defensive artillery fire to slow the enemy advance.

As the Germans continued to press the attack towards the area that Lieutenant Fox occupied, he adjusted the artillery fire closer to his position. Finally he was warned that the next adjustment would bring the deadly artillery right on top of his position. After acknowledging the danger, Lieutenant Fox insisted that the last adjustment be fired as this was the only way to defeat the attacking soldiers. Later, when a counterattack retook the position from the Germans, Lieutenant Fox's body was found with the bodies of approximately 100 German soldiers. Lieutenant Fox's gallant and courageous actions, at the supreme sacrifice of his own life, contributed greatly to delaying the enemy advance until other infantry and artillery units could reorganize to

repel the attack. His extraordinary valorous actions were in keeping with the most cherished traditions of military service, and reflect the utmost credit on him, his unit, and the United States Army.

**NO PHOTO**  
**AVAILABLE**



**PRIVATE FIRST CLASS WILLY F. JAMES, JR.**  
**UNITED STATES ARMY**  
**MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

For extraordinary heroism in action on 7 April 1945 near Lippoldsberg, Germany. As lead scout during a maneuver to secure and expand a vital bridgehead, Private First Class James was the first to draw enemy fire. He was pinned down for over an hour, during which time he observed enemy positions in detail. Returning to his platoon, he assisted in working out a new plan of maneuver. He then led a squad in the assault, accurately designating targets as he advanced, until he was killed by enemy machine gun fire while going to the aid of his fatally wounded platoon leader. Private First Class James' fearless, self-assigned actions, coupled with his diligent devotion to duty exemplified the finest traditions of the Armed Forces.





## **STAFF SERGEANT RUBEN RIVERS**

## **UNITED STATES ARMY**

### **MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

For extraordinary heroism in action during the 15-19 November 1944, toward Guebling, France. Though severely wounded in the leg, Sergeant Rivers refused medical treatment and evacuation, took command of another tank, and advanced with his company in Guebling the next day. Repeatedly refusing evacuation, Sergeant Rivers continued to direct his tank's fire at enemy positions through the morning of 19 November 1944. At dawn, Company A's tanks began to advance towards Bougaktroff, but were stopped by enemy fire. Sergeant Rivers, joined by another tank, opened fire on the enemy tanks, covering company A as they withdrew. While doing so, Sergeant River's tank was hit, killing him and wounding the crew. Staff Sergeant Rivers' fighting spirit and daring leadership were an inspiration to his unit and exemplify the highest traditions of military service.





## **CAPTAIN CHARLES L. THOMAS**

### **UNITED STATES ARMY**

### **MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

For extraordinary heroism in action on 14 December 1944, near Climbach, France. While riding in the lead vehicle of a task force organized to storm and capture the village of Climbach, France, then First Lieutenant Thomas's armored scout car was subjected to intense enemy artillery, self-propelled gun, and small arms fire. Although wounded by the initial burst of hostile fire, Lieutenant Thomas signaled the remainder of the column to halt and, despite the severity of his wounds, assisted the crew of the wrecked car in dismounting. Upon leaving the scant protection which the vehicle afforded, Lieutenant Thomas was again subjected to a hail of enemy fire which inflicted multiple gunshot wounds in his chest, legs, and left arm. Despite the intense pain caused by these wounds, Lieutenant Thomas ordered and directed the dispersion and emplacement of two antitank guns which in a few moments were promptly and effectively returning the enemy fire. Realizing that he could no longer remain in command of the platoon, he signaled to the platoon commander to join him. Lieutenant Thomas then thoroughly oriented him on enemy gun dispositions and the general situation. Only after he was certain that his junior officer was in full control of the situation did he permit himself to be evacuated. First Lieutenant Thomas' outstanding heroism

traditions of the Armed Forces.

**NO PHOTO**  
**AVAILABLE**



**PRIVATE GEORGE WATSON**  
**UNITED STATES ARMY**  
**MEDAL OF HONOR CITATION**

For extraordinary heroism in action on 8 March 1943. Private Watson was on board a ship which was attacked and hit by enemy bombers. When the ship was abandoned, Private Watson, instead of seeking to save himself, remained in the water assisting several soldiers who could not swim to reach the safety of the raft. This heroic action, which subsequently cost him his life, resulted in the saving of several of his comrades. Weakened by his exertions, he was dragged down by the suction of the sinking ship and was drowned. Private Watson's extraordinarily valorous actions, daring leadership, and self-sacrificing devotion to his fellow-man exemplify the finest traditions of military service.